THE GREATNESS AND THE HAPPINESS OF A PEOPLE BRIEFLY CONSIDERED.

A

DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED IN THE

SCOTCH CHURCH AT MONTREAL,

ON THE

21ST OF APRIL LAST,

BEING

The Day appointed for a General Thanksgiving.

BY THE REV. JAMES SOMERVILLE.

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DEUT. XXXIII—29.

Happy art thou O Israel! who is like unto thee, O people, saved by the Lord, the shield of thy help, and who is the sword of thy Excellency! and thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee, and thou shalt tread upon their high places.

TO consider on what grounds the greatness and the happiness of a nation must rest, and by what means they are best secured, must be a Subject in the highest degree interesting to every one who loves his

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country; or who has even a proper regard for his own welfare. This ſubject is intereſting at all times; but in an eſpecial manner at thoſe periods, when every one who is diſpoſed to attend to it, may learn a leſſon from the events which have taken place.

If we look back to what has happened, within but a few years, we ſhall find, that in many caſes, the wiſdom of the wiſe ſeems to have become fooliſhneſs; and that an overwhelming power, had threatened to ſet at defiance, all thoſe calculations reſpecting human affairs, in which men had been wont to truſt. It was a period of deceit, terror, and deſolation.

In contemplating the awful phenomenon, the human mind ſeems to have loſt its energy, and, in a kind of liſtleſs ſtupor, appeared to have concluded, that there were no means to be found to counteract the progreſs of the giant force.

At this important criſis, another power put itſelf in motion, wiſhing, if it had been poſſible, to attain to greatneſs, by lending its feeble help to baniſh freedom from the Earth; and to deſtroy every thing which gives a value to human exiſtence by making it dignified and reſpectable.

But, bleſſed be God, theſe times have paſſed away. The energies of the human mind have again been called forth from that ſtate of torpor into which they had ſunk, and theſe exertions which have been made

made have been crowned with ſucceſs.—The giant power has crumbled and mouldered away, and its feeble ally has only ſhewn how totally unfit it is for any purpoſe, but that of making itſelf contemptible.

When we conſider all theſe matters, it muſt be ſeen in a very clear light, how becoming and proper it is in us this day, to have been called together for the purpoſe of devoutly and humbly offering up thanksgiving unto the Almighty Ruler of the Univerſe for that kindneſs which in the courſe of his Providence we have experienced.

But however proper it is in us to join our thanksgiving to thoſe of other nations, who, like ourſelves have been ſaved from the cruelty of the oppreſſor; I think it may be better, in the mean time, to turn our thoughts to thoſe bleſſings, which as a people and a nation we ourſelves enjoy: ſo that from knowing on what grounds the greatneſs and the happineſs of a people muſt reſt; and by what means they are preſerved and upheld, each of us in our ſeveral ſituations and places may be diſpoſed to attend carefully to thoſe duties which are required of us.

Always remembering that our truſt ſhould at all times be placed in the protection of a kind providence; never let us loſe ſight of thoſe means by which that protection will be inſured to us. Let us always keep in view thoſe means which God has promiſed to

bleſs ; in order that we may never be guilty of the folly of neglecting them, and yet hope to meet with ſucceſs.

In giving you my thoughts, reſpecting the greatneſs and the happineſs of a people, I ſhall merely direct your attention to a few of thoſe particulars, which appear to conſtitute the greatneſs and the happineſs of that nation of which we form a part.

But before I proceed, I deem it neceſſary to caution you againſt a miſtake, as pernicious as it is common. I mean, that of being carried away with theory and ſpeculation, inſtead of attending to what is the real and true ſtatement of the matter. By this I wiſh you clearly to underſtand, that if it ſhall appear, upon juſt enquiry, that the people of which we form a part, are in the practical and actual enjoyment of bleſſings to which all other nations have been ſtrangers; or which they have not enjoyed in an equal degree; then we are bound by every juſt and proper principle to be thankful, and to do every thing in our power for the preſerving of the peace, good order, and harmony of that ſociety of which we form a part.

In ſpeaking of the greatneſs and happineſs of that nation to which we belong, I ſhall place, as the baſis of that greatneſs and happineſs, the ſpirit of the people at large. By the people, I mean the whole in-

inhabitants of the country, and not any particular claſs of them: though I am aware that the word has been uſed in a different ſenſe; to give a certain claſs of people a degree of artificial importance of which they would have never thought, had it not been inſtilled into them by perſons, of whoſe deſigns, thoſe called the people, were not aware.

By the ſpirit of the people at large, I mean that ſenſe of independence, and correctneſs of thinking, of which that nation I am ſpeaking of, has been allowed to poſſeſs a very large portion. This is the Spirit which is hated and envied by every Deſpot; though it will be cheriſhed by the Monarch of a free people, as the brighteſt jewel in his crown.—This ſpirit is the ſource of every noble and manly feeling; it is generous, brave, and undaunted. No highneſs of rank, no greatneſs of wealth, will ſecure the vicious and unprincipled from its cenſure and puniſhment; while, at the ſame time, the man devoid of rank and wealth cannot be oppreſſed with impunity.

When ſuch is the value and importance of this ſpirit, let us conſider by what means it is excited, cheriſhed, and preſerved.

In the firſt place, it is excited by that education which the youth of that nation very generally receive. It is thus, that the ſparks of Independence and perſonal dignity areexcited; and the founda-

tion

tion is thus laid, upon which the future character is formed. The youth are thus taught, and they alſo find in their actual experience, that there is no protection afforded for meanneſs, baſeneſs, or deceit:—that they muſt act their part well, or nothing can ſave them from that contempt and diſgrace which they have brought upon themſelves.

In addition to this, the youth very generally become acquainted with the truths of the Chriſtian religion, which have a much greater influence upon the mind than the generality of people are aware of. It is true, that the education a man may have received, may not, in every caſe, be ſuppoſed to have been of much uſe to him in forming his character, or in leading him on to eminence and diſtinction: but we ought to conſider, that when ſuch have been the principal means of forming the character of ſo many who have acted a diſtinguiſhed part in ſociety, that they ſhould never be deemed of little importance.

In the ſecond place, the ſpirit of the people is preſerved by that political conſtitution under which they live. They feel that they are protected; and that every one has a perſonal reſpectability ſuited to his ſituation in life, of which nothing but his own miſconduct can deprive him. It is this which ſtirs up every one who underſtands his duty to exert himſelf well; for he is ſure of the reward of his labour, and that in the uſe of proper means no one is allowed

to

to interfere with his exertions. Hence the many inſtances which we find of people who began life under the moſt unfavorable circumſtances, riſing by degrees to great eminence and reſpectability, and alſo becoming diſtinguiſhed and uſeful members of ſociety.

While ſuch examples excite the emulation of the well diſpoſed youth, and ſtimulate their exertions, they alſo ſhew them the neceſſity of uſing only thoſe means which are commendable and proper, otherwiſe they are ſure to fail in any wiſh they may have entertained, to become reſpectable and uſeful members of ſociety.

When ſpeaking of the political conſtitution of that people of which we form a part, let it be diſtinctly attended to; that the ſtability of that conſtitution appears to depend in a great meaſure, on that highminded and noble body which form a part of the national legiſlature. They are placed in that happy ſtate of independence, which is neither to be awed by ſuperior power; nor induced to act raſhly or fooliſhly by idle clamour or artificial commotion. To be convinced that what I have now ſtated is true, look only at the exertions which thoſe men have made both at home and abroad for the welfare of their country.

In addition to this, there are ſo many men who are poſſeſſed of ſound wiidom and independence of ſpirit, who watch over the welfare of the nation at large;

that there is little occaſion for apprehending, that any real evil which can be removed, will paſs unnoticed for any great length of time. The perſeverance with which the abolition of a traffic in human beings has been followed up, will ſhew clearly the truth of what I have now ſaid.

In the third place the ſpirit of the people is preſerved by the independence, the purity, and the dignity of our Courts of Juſtice. This is one of the firſt bleſſings which a nation can poſſeſs.

In every nation in which Juſtice is not reſpected and enforced, the people ſoon degenerate and become ſwindlers and cheats, murderers and aſſaſſins.—The hiſtory of all the nations of the earth proves, that what I have now ſtated is ſtrictly correct. How neceſſary is it then, to have the means of curbing and keeping in order, the ſelfiſh and unruly paſſions of mankind.

The welfare of a nation can neither be promoted nor preſerved, without the impartial diſtribution of Juſtice: and Juſtice cannot be impartially diſtributed; unleſs the Judges are independent. They muſt not be afraid of the face of man —They muſt therefore feel themſelves perfectly independent and ſecure, unleſs from malverſation in their office; and this malverſation muſt be ſo evident, as to admit of no doubt.

If

If a Judge feel himself so insecure that his official character may be tarnished by idle clamour, or by noisy declamation, how is it possible that that man can cause Justice to be respected; or how can he give his decisions with that firmness with which they should be given?—In that nation to which we belong therefore, the Courts of Justice are as pure, as perhaps it is possible for human institutions to become. This has been effected by making the Judges independent.—In such circumstances the only motive a Judge can feel, is to discharge the duties of his office well. Indeed every man whose business it is to speak the truth should be so independent, as will enable him to act with due spirit and firmness.

To see the truth of what I now say of our Courts of Justice, let any man possessed of ordinary candour attend to the minuteness with which evidence is investigated in the course of a trial; and he will thus be forced to confess, that it shews in a true point of view the dignity to which the human character may attain.

In the fourth place the spirit of the people is preserved by the freedom of the Press.—This is a most powerful mean for diffusing information amongst a people. It is true the information which may be diffused in this manner may be false, and the most pernicious errors may be thus inculcated—But, my friends, if we are to reject what is really good in itself, because

cauſe it may occaſionally be the means of exciting trouble and difficulty, I am afraid there are very few bleſſings that we ſhall not be obliged to relinquiſh for the ſame reaſon.—Men in their uſual intercourſe with each other often deal in falſehood; they make profeſſions of friendſhip where they mean nothing, and at the very moment they may be moſt keenly purſuing their own ſelfiſh views, they may be trying to make you belive, that it is your intereſt only which they wiſh to promote.—But though ſuch abuſes prevail in ſociety, ſurely that circumſtance does not prove, that men ſhould not aſſociate with each other, or that they ſhould ſeperate and become ſolitary individuals. In like manner might we argue with regard to health, or the poſſeſſion of riches. Health has very often been applied to a bad uſe; but ſtill it is conſidered as a moſt valuable poſſeſſion. Riches have alſo been very often employed to promote the worſt of purpoſes; yet riches are deemed, and that properly, a very deſirable object.

When therefore, we allow that an important and uſeful privilege may be and often is, made uſe of in a very improper manner, never let us loſe ſight of the real value of the Privilege in itſelf. When we wiſh to get rid of any difficulty or inconvenience; never let us forget this circumſtance, that, if we uſe improper means for accompliſhing what we have in view, we ſhall thereby in all probability introduce ſomething which will be a great deal worſe, than that of which

we are

now complaining —The advocates for innovation, of whatever party they may be, ſhould never allow themſelves to become indifferent as to the nature of the means they make uſe of to attain the end they have in view.—If you make uſe of improper and unjuſt means to obtain an object which in itſelf is deſirable and highly commendable, you thereby ſet an example to thoſe who may poſſeſs leſs principle, but more cunning; to make uſe of the ſame kind of means to obtain an end, which ought to be execrated and deteſted.

Beſides, in all free governments, commotions, and turbulence will occaſionally take place.—But it is ſurely better to be liable to this; this open and avowed evil, than to tremble in ſecret, leſt the dagger of the aſſaſſin may deprive you of life; or leſt you may be dragged to the dungeon alike unpitied and alike diſregarded.—The beſt ſecurity is, for every one to know his duty and to be at all times diſpoſed to attend to it, with firmneſs and fidelity.

In the fifth place, the ſpirit of the people is preſerved and cheriſhed by that decency of manners which prevails, and alſo by thoſe morals which are not only countenanced but alſo practiſed. When decency of manners prevails it muſt be owing to this; that every perſon who acts contrary to decency, is ſure to be cenſured and puniſhed.

To ſhew you how very highly this ſentiment is felt and acted upon by that people of whom we form a part, you have only to attend to what takes place even amongſt the loweſt in point of rank and fortune, when any one has the effrontery to outrage that ſentiment of which I have been ſpeaking. You will thus ſee, that thoſe people even the loweſt in ſociety, have a much higher and more correct ſentiment of propriety and decency of conduct; than the far-famed Greeks, or the renowned Romans, ever poſſeſſed at any period of their hiſtory.

It is of the utmoſt importance that right thinking ſhould be diffuſed through the people at large: and that they ſhould have a high ſenſe of what is proper and becoming. Unleſs this is attended to, a people are in the high road to ruin and deſtruction.—It is true what I now recommend may ſometimes be the means of raiſing troubles and difficulties. But theſe troubles and difficulties, when met with calmneſs and deciſion ſoon paſs away; and thoſe very people who have been miſled, will afterwards, when they diſcover their error, be the firmeſt ſupport of thoſe very meaſures of which they had diſapproved.—A ſtorm of thunder and lightning is grand and awful, and ſometimes may be deſtructive; but generally, it balances the clouds, purifies the air, and is the harbinger of fair weather, and fruitful fields.

I added, that the morals of the people at large were

were alſo good. The morals of a people muſt be good when vice is obliged at leaſt, to conceal itſelf; when it is not countenanced nor attempted to be juſtified.

When we think of the manners of ancient times when vices, not even to be named amongſt us were openly and publickly committed even by their greateſt and their ſuppoſed wiſeſt men; what great reaſon have we to be thankful; that we have been preſerved from ſuch foul contagion.

But the good morals of a people are ſhewn in the way in which men act when placed in the moſt trying circumſtances. When an ancient Roman found himſelf placed in diſagreeable circumſtances, he thought he performed a noble exploit by putting himſelf to death: and this cowardly action was gravely ſpoken of as a heroic deed, as ſomething great and praiſe worthy. So do not thoſe act who have learned, what is taught them in the Chriſtian religion. It is true that in the madneſs of paſſion, many inſtances there are of this crime amongſt the people of which we have been ſpeaking, but ſtill it has not been commonly conſidered as any proof either of wiſdom, or of real courage.

To ſee the manner in which the courage of the nation to which we belong has been diſplayed, I ſhall not deſire you to turn your attention to thoſe fields where hoſts encounter hoſts; and where the ſoldier calmly

calmly and firmly ſteps into that breach where he knows that certain death awaits him: I will rather conduct you to that ſcene, in which true heroiſm and fortitude exiſt in their moſt perfect ſtate. The ſcene I wiſh to ſet before you is that of a veſſel gradually ſinking in the waves: deſtruction is inevitable, yet no man leaves his poſt: To the ſolicitations of the thoughtleſs, that they might be allowed to render themſelves inſenſible previous to death; alledging as a reaſon, that ſuch a mode of acting could make no difference; the anſwer was calm, yet decided; "Let us die like men and not like brute beaſts."* This conduct ſpeaks for itſelf, and it cannot be rendered more ſtriking by any comment.

I ſhall only farther add in the ſixth place, that the ſpirit of the people is preſerved by those benevolent and charitable inſtitutions for which as a nation they are ſo famed. There is no country where ſuch proviſion is made not only for the employment of the poor; but alſo for their ſupport, when they are unemployed or in diſtreſs:—And of all the people who have ever lived on the face of the earth; none are ſo alive to the call of humanity, from whatever quarter, as they are. The wealth of the nation enables them to be thus liberal and charitable, but I would not wiſh to conſider wealth as really contributing to the ſtrength of a nation, without the other circumſtances which

* See account of the loss of the Abergavenny.——*Naval Chronicle for* 1805.

which I have mentioned: For a people who have no other dependence, but their wealth, will not long be poſſeſſed of that wealth in which they have thus truſted. But, when along with wealth they poſſeſs that ſpirit of which I have been ſpeaking, (which is pre-eminently the caſe, with the nation to which we belong,) it is then that their wealth is moſt likely to be applied to thoſe purpoſes, which will cheriſh and ſupport the true greatneſs and happineſs of a people.

I have thus given you my thoughts on what conſtitutes the greatneſs and happineſs of a nation; and I have ſaid, it conſiſts in the ſpirit of the people at large; that this ſpirit is preſerved and cheriſhed in the nation to which we belong; by the nature of the education which the youth receive; by the political conſtitution under which they live; by the independence, the purity, and the dignity, of the courts of juſtice; by the freedom of the preſs; by that decency of manners which prevails; and alſo, by the morals which are really countenanced and practiſed; and laſtly, by benevolent and charitable inſtitutions.

Allow me now, before I conclude to recommend it unto you to acuſtom yourſelves to think and reflect, before that you give any opinion as to the circumſtances in which you may be actually placed.

Whoever expects to paſs through the world without trouble, does not underſtand his real intereſt; and whoever wiſhes to obtain for himſelf individually, a ſecurity from evil which is not to be found any where on earth; will in due time diſcover, that he has

has been amuſing himſelf with a dream, and that he muſt awake to vexation and diſappointment.

Study to acquire a calm, contented diſpoſition. I do not mean that you ſhould become careleſs or indifferent, or that you ſhould wiſh to be idle. I mean the direct contrary, that you ſhould be well employed at all times; for to be well employed is the baſis of human happineſs.

Guard againſt envy, and the whole tribe of the mean and low paſſions. Be at all times the steady friends of peace and good order in ſociety; and avoid as you would your bittereſt enemy, all thoſe who are continually complaining of what is taking place.

Recollect, that you have already been tried with alarms; and that you may again be tried in the ſame manner. Act as you have hitherto done, and theſe alarms will paſs away.

Truſt in the protection of a wiſe and good Providence; and be at all times diſpoſed to attend carefully to thoſe duties, which are required at your hands.

Remember, that the bleſſings of life can neither be acquired nor preſerved, without diligence, watchfulneſs, and exertion. If you underſtand this doctrine aright, long ſhall you have reaſon to ſay—"Happy art thou, O Iſrael! who is like unto thee, "O people, ſaved by the Lord; the ſhield of thy "help, and who is the ſword of thy Excellency; "and thine enemies ſhall be found liars unto thee, "and thou ſhalt tread upon their high places."-Amen.